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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 002748

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON AVIAN INFLUENZA IN GREECE; H5N1 NOT
CONFIRMED, ALL TESTING INCONCLUSIVE

REF: ATHENS 027151

1. (SBU) Summary: Despite the GoG announcement on 17 October of a positive test for Avian Influenza within its borders, recent serological testing for H5N1 has proven negative at both the Thessaloniki Virological Laboratory and EU Reference Laboratory in Weybridge, UK. Additional testing is ongoing at each lab; with the more definitive virological test results for influenza, the egg embryo blood test, due next week. The GoG confirmation of Avian Influenza in Greece thus appears to have been premature and showed at several points over the last week the government's lack of expertise in public relations, post remains vigilant for any definitive confirmation of H5N1 with respect to the proximity of confirmed cases in Turkey and Romania. End Summary

Government Actions/Reactions

2. (SBU) Since its premature announcement on 17 October, the GoG has taken has taken a pragmatic approach to the Avian situation in not wanting to create undue public concern by any of its subsequent statements or actions. While the GoG has struggled with its ability to effectively disseminate information to the general public, post has noted close cooperation with Brussels and open communication with Embassy staff that has made sifting through the media reports and conjecture far easier. Post has learned that the GoG is planning to utilize certain aspects of the bio-hazard plan developed for the 2004 Olympic Games as a basis for any potential outbreak of Avian Influenza as it relates to quarantine, treatment and overall public safety.

Public Reaction to Government

3. (SBU) In the media, there is open relief that the sample in question tested negative. There is also a strong feeling that the GoG should have handled the issue in a more responsible way. There is a general frustration directed primarily at the Ministry of Agriculture for the lack of information shared with the public. There were several comments that the GoG in particular did not provide a realistic sense of the danger nor had it communicated effectively the facts surrounding Avian Flu. Public comment indicates that health experts utilized by the media were appreciated, especially in the void created by the GoG.

Effects on the Poultry Market

4. (U) Although Greece is a net poultry importer, it produces 80 percent of the poultry it consumes; 180,000 metric tons per annum. The estimated value of the poultry market in Greece is: Meat-450 million euros, Eggs-120 million euros. While Greece does engage in some frozen exports, the size of the export market and the effects of recent bans on Greek poultry will not have a significant effect on the economy. Rather, a decrease in poultry consumption by a misinformed or uninformed public will cause significant stress to domestic poultry producers and force the 16-week harvest cycle for the birds into a 16-week harvest and freeze cycle, thus increasing the supply of frozen chicken within the country. A spokesman for the Greek poultry industry recently claimed that sales of poultry were down 60-70 percent in the last week.

Amcit concerns remains low

5. (U) The consulate has received fewer calls from Amcits regarding Avian Influenza than anticipated. While general Amcit public concern remains low key, Consular has posted a link on the Embassy website to the Avian Flu Fact Sheet of the Department as well as the appropriate CDC and WHO sites. The Ambassador has scheduled a Town Hall meeting for Wednesday the 26th of October where the RMO, CONS and Embassy Staff will address concerns surrounding a potential Avian outbreak. The same day, consular will hold a previously scheduled warden's meeting to ensure that the facts, concerns, and preparedness of the USG are understood by the greater Amcit community.

Comment

16. (SBU) It is important to note that Greece contains 10-12 major wetland areas with high concentrations of migratory birds which pose a potentially serious risk for transmission of the H5N1 virus. That said, contacts in the Agriculture Ministry suspect that many reports of dead birds in the region will ultimately be attributed to the highly contagious Newcastle Disease, a paramyxovirus prevalent in the Balkans.

17. (SBU) It is critical for the GoG to ensure that its citizens understand the facts, probability of an outbreak, and the risks presented by Avian Influenza. Unfortunately, the GoG does not appear to have learned its lesson regarding public relations from its handling of the Helios Airways tragedy in August and has once again made its work more difficult by alienating the public by lack of effective communication. Post continues to prepare internal plans and procedures for the mission and communication with Amcits which will be reported septel.
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